

Can telework ease peer pressure in Japan?

[Noriyuki Yanagawa](#) Aug 5, 2019



Commuters crowd a train station in Tokyo. | BLOOMBERG

Rush-hour congestion in big cities is a common problem in any country. In Tokyo and other major cities in Japan, passengers commute on heavily packed trains as everybody heads to work almost around the same time every morning. What's particularly striking is the typical scene observed when commuter trains are forced to make emergency stops. Most commuters do not give up trying to get to work and make long lines waiting to take buses or taxis so that they can get there as quickly as possible.

The way commuters in Japan spend so much energy getting to work at

the same time as their colleagues may partly be explained as a manifestation of Japanese people's diligence. But such behavior also comes from social pressure that forces people to act in a manner that does not deviate from the group's collective behavior, which makes Japanese ways of work straitjacketed. The sight of company workers taking packed commuter trains even in this age of low economic growth reminds us of the strong power of peer pressure.

The tightening of regulations against long working hours in recent years is an attempt to change this social atmosphere. When people are engaged in the kind of work that requires long hours on the job, uniformly tightening work-hour regulation will negatively affect the results. But if people are spending unnecessarily long hours at work, and they can't shorten their hours because their colleagues are not going home yet, changing the general direction through regulations should have positive effects.

Another factor that may serve as a catalyst to change the way Japanese people work is the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. As the one-year countdown to the opening ceremony of the games has started, many companies have launched teleworking experiments, allowing employees to work from home instead of commuting to the office to avoid traffic congestion during the Olympics.

The primary purpose of such trials is to explore how long employees can work remotely without hampering operations. But more important than obtaining such data is the experience that many Japanese workers will gain from not coming to the office on time, or by doing their jobs without ever going to the office.

Progress in information technology has made many people vaguely feel that they must be able to do their job without going to the office. Still, the impact of actually experiencing and confirming that will be enormous. This is because if you're working for a typical Japanese company, where

peer pressure tends to have a strong influence on employees, having the opportunity to work in a different setting — which may give you a better environment in which to work without having to worry about the scrutiny of your colleagues — will have the potential to ease peer pressure.

Therefore expanded opportunities for telecommuting could be a catalyst for changing the ways of work at many Japanese firms and, consequently, their corporate cultures. And ensuring that such changes take place will give each company new business opportunities.

A major challenge confronting Japan's economy is how to boost sluggish growth potential amid the decline of the population. To achieve that it will be important to create a plan in which as little manpower as possible can take charge of production with the aid of new technology such as artificial intelligence. But at the same time, it will also be important to build a society in which individuals can work in a more fulfilling manner. Enabling diverse ways of work that suit the needs and circumstance of each employee will be a key component of that goal.

Under Japan's prevalent corporate culture, however, diverse ways of work that are the result of institutional reforms may not be fully put into practice.

For example, even when the system allows workers to take a summer vacation at his or her own convenience, strong peer pressure tends to discourage employees from taking time off when others are working, resulting in everybody taking vacation at the same time.

Substantial changes are unlikely to occur unless steps are taken to alter the established practices or cultures within companies or society, instead of merely adopting institutional changes. This is particularly important on issues such as the ways of work — changes that can heavily affect each individual's future. The key is to take steps to reduce the impact of peer pressure on employees.

Expanding teleworking opportunities contributes to diversifying the ways of work to suit each employee's needs and circumstances. Employees who wish to keep working while raising small children should be allowed to work from home. Remote work will also enable workers to relocate to other parts of the country while continuing to work for companies based in Tokyo. Giving employees greater choices through remote work will make their jobs more fulfilling, which will no doubt be a plus for Japan's economy as a whole.

In addition to that, I hope that increased opportunities to work separately from other employees both in terms of time and space will help reduce excessive peer pressure in Japanese society, and invigorate the way people work by giving them much more diverse choices.

Toshiyuki Yanagawa is a professor in the Graduate School of Economics at the University of Tokyo.

LATEST COMMENTARY STORIES